

Amy Ragsdale

“I think that dance has the possibility of expressing the ineffable; of reaching a subconscious level that circumvents the rational, logical, word-oriented mind,” says choreographer Amy Ragsdale.

The longtime University of Montana dance professor and founder of Headwaters Dance Company and its predecessor, The Montana Transport Company (Mo-Trans), moved to Montana in 1988 from her native New York City, where she had danced with several contemporary troupes. As a dancer and teacher, she has performed and taught throughout the United States and around the world.

She found abundant challenges, as well as inspiration, in moving to Montana, where many audiences had little exposure to contemporary dance. In response, she began to make works that were more theatrical and accessible, striving to make dances “that move the viewer emotionally or intellectually, as well as kinesthetically.”

As she explored choreography, she found herself inspired by the famous choreographer Bill T. Jones, with whom she had studied during graduate school at Wesleyan University in Connecticut (she earned her undergraduate degree from Harvard-Radcliffe College in Cambridge, CT) and danced with in New York City.

“It was his orientation toward making political work, and work that drew from his personal experience, that shifted my view of choreography from being purely a fun exercise in inventing movement toward being a way to express other kinds of content,” she writes. “I began to use choreography as a way to explore social and political issues that mattered to me, as well as to explore my own personal experience of the world and interpersonal relationships.”

Juliette Crump, dance professor emeritus at UM, describes her colleague as “a beautiful dancer whose many performances over the years have mesmerized and intrigued me for their clarity of expression and daring technique.”

After founding Headwaters Dance Company in 2004, Ragsdale embarked upon an ambitious project: “The Montana Suite,” a compilation of four dances, created by four nationally known choreographers and inspired by four Montana landscapes – the Boulder Batholith, the Hi-Line, the Rocky Mountain Front and the southeastern corner of the state.

Each choreographer spent a week to 10 days in their assigned region, touring, meeting locals, and reading fiction and non-fiction about the place. Then they created a 20-minute dance based on their impressions, in collaboration with a Montana-based composer.

The epic “movement anthology” was four years in the making and premieres Feb. 5-7 in Missoula. After touring Montana, the suite will be performed regionally and nationally. According to Crump, the project exemplifies how Ragsdale “is always looking for ways to connect her dance to Montana communities and to relevant issues for Montanans.”

Ragsdale has made her mark as a teacher too, having received the Outstanding Teacher Award from the School of Fine Arts, and the Outstanding Faculty Award from The University of Montana. She headed the dance program from 1988-2000.

“When I was a student majoring in dance, we used to joke that when we grew up we wanted to be Amy Ragsdale,” writes Lindsay Gilmour, now an assistant professor of theater arts at Ithaca College in New York.

“She was the perfect combination for us: an inspiring teacher, a great choreographer, a beautiful dancer, a director of a dance company ... For us, Amy embodied our hopes and dreams. She made it seem possible to pursue what it was we all loved.”

Her teaching has taken her to dance studios and schools around the world. She spent 1992 teaching modern dance at art schools in Bali, Java, Sumatra and Indonesia, and has also taught in South Korea, Spain and Martinique.

Ragsdale is also credited with developing a vigorous, adventuresome dance community in Missoula. “She has always been willing to reach out to other organizations and artists in her pursuit of high quality art in our world,” says Michele Antonioli, an associate professor of dance at UM. Antonioli praises both Ragsdale’s “stunning collaborative pieces” and her site-specific works for broadening awareness and appreciation of modern dance in the state.

“Guest choreographers of national fame have come here and remarked about the amazing fact that great modern dance existed in the outback of western Montana,” says Antonioli.

“Amy Ragsdale is hugely responsible for the high quality dance, the strong community of support and the fertile ground that now exist for dance to continue to evolve and grow in Montana,” she adds.

Profile written by Kristi Niemeyer for the Montana Arts Council.